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Ad astra: Graphic Signalling in the *Acrostic Hymn of Nebuchadnezzar II* (BM 55469)

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Abstract: This article examines two orthographic features in the Acrostic Hymn of Nebuchadnezzar II. It aims to show that the text makes use of the possibilities of the cuneiform writing system to create various levels of meaning. The first example clarifies structure and content with regard to a difficult passage in the fourth and last stanza of the text, in which a possible change of actors is indicated by an orthographic feature. The second example shows how orthography is used in the first stanza of the text to augment its message. These examples demonstrate how structural elements and micro-features such as orthography were used creatively to enhance the message of the hymn.

Keywords: orthography, acrostic, Acrostic Hymn of Nebuchadnezzar II, construction of meaning, Nabû, Marduk

The *Acrostic Hymn of Nebuchadnezzar II* praises the deity of scribal arts, Nabû, and details the divine appointment of Nabû-kudurrî-ušur II as king of Babylonia. The text has been known to Assyriology for a long time. It was first published in 1898 by S.A. Strong (1898: 155–161). The most recent edition of the hymn can be found in Oshima (2014), and it is chiefly on this edition that I draw in the following discussion. Despite the successive editions, the content of this hymn, and especially its formal characteristics, have not received much attention in the last 120 years, except for the acrostic formed by the beginning of the respective stanzas. Foster (2009: 190) stated that the hymn “contains little of interest beyond its acrostic, “God Nabu!” and a passage, perhaps reused from an earlier king or added to an older hymn, referring to the divine election of Nebuchadnezzar.” In the following, I will demonstrate that this assessment does not do justice to the creativity and skill that went into composing the *Acrostic Hymn of Nebuchadnezzar II*. I will present two case studies showing that orthography in this text is used, on the one hand, to clarify structure and content (§A), and on the other, to purposefully enhance the text’s message (§B).¹ I will argue that the author(s) of the text drew on the possibilities inherent in the cuneiform writing system to create various levels of meaning within the text.

The *Acrostic Hymn of Nebuchadnezzar II* is composed of 40 lines distributed over four stanzas of ten lines each. Within each stanza, every line starts with the same sign: together, they spell the name of the god Nabû (^dna-bu-u₂). The majority of the text is spread out in three columns, enhancing the prominence of its visual appearance on the tablet.² The acrostic hymn starts by listing epithets and attributes describing Nabû. Of particular importance are attributes associated with Nabû’s role in establishing kingship, as the text culminates in the appointment of Nabû-kudurrî-ušur II as king. Interestingly, many of the attributes of Nabû mentioned in this text are more commonly attested for Marduk. This induced scholars early on to attribute the hymn to Marduk, notwithstanding the acrostic spelling of Nabû’s name already recognised by Strong

¹ This is not to say that the text does not have other meanings than the aspects pointed out here. My comments on these orthographic elements should be read against the background of the text in its entirety, which starts on the divine plane and culminates in the divine appointment of king Nabû-kudurrî-ušur II. The composition itself should be seen as a whole, with individual aspects underlining the general content of the text.

² Textual distributions on tablets of this kind have been linked to metre, see Strong (1898: 154) for our text and Lambert (1996 [1963, 1960]: 66) for column division in the Babylonian Theodicy.

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(1898).³ Jastrow (1905: 510 note 4) suggested that the acrostic did not directly relate to the content of the hymn, but possibly to Nabû-kudurri-ušur's name, and that it reflected the interrelatedness of the cults of Marduk and Nabû. By contrast, Seux (1976: 125 note 4) adhered to Strong's recognition of the acrostic, supporting this stance by a suggested reading for the lacuna of the first line. Until then, the reading of the lacuna had been left open, following Strong (1898: 158), who read ^d[...] u₂ ma-li-ku DINGIR.DINGIR šu₂-ut DINGIR [AN KI], "*king of the gods of heaven and earth*" (p. 159, italics in the original), with no indication of the deity's name. Seux (1976: 125 with note 4), on the other hand, suggested reading Nabû's name in the break, spelled as in the acrostic: ^d[na-bu]-u₂. From this point onwards, the attribution of this hymn to Nabû was no longer questioned. Collation by Oshima (2014: 475 and pl. XXXII) has now shown that what is left of the first line of the tablet does not belong to the name of the deity mentioned, but already to an epithet, reading ^d[na-bu-u₂ EN GAL]-u₂, "The god Nabû, the great [lord]" (p. 476). This, however, does not mean that the attribution of this text should be questioned again. Indeed, Oshima argues for an even stronger role of Nabû in the text, as his translation of the last stanza shows. In this stanza, Marduk is explicitly mentioned as the acting deity in the text. Oshima (2014: 477, 480) suggests that after this passage dealing with Marduk the text reverts to Nabû as the acting deity, though without mentioning his name explicitly. That this is indeed how the text sequence should be understood is supported by the arguments in §A below.

Modern scholarship regarding the development of Babylonian theology shows that Nabû rose to greater prominence in the first millennium than he had previously enjoyed. During this process, he absorbed attributes of his father, Marduk (Seux 1976: 124; Oshima 2014: 473f.). The most obvious example in our text is the usage of the name Lugaldimmerankia (line 4), one of Marduk's names in *Enūma eliš* (V 112, VI 139), for Nabû (Oshima 2014: 473f., 478; Foster ³2005: 849 note 2; Seux 1976: 125 note 8). Similar attributions are attested in other first millennium hymns to Nabû published by Lambert (1978). Moreover, these hymns contain some of the epithets and attributes found in the *Acrostic Hymn of Nebuchadnezzar II*. This, however, does not mean that Nabû replaced his father. In our text, Marduk explicitly occurs in the last stanza and plays an important role in the divine appointment of Nabû-kudurri-ušur II, despite the focus on Nabû in the rest of the text.

As is often the case with Babylonian acrostics,⁴ and as befits a deity linked to the scribal arts, the acrostic in this hymn works on the graphic, but not on the aural level.⁵ Soll (1988: 316) suggested that the most famous acrostic in Babylonian literature, the acrostic in the *Babylonian Theodicy*, provided an additional function to the text as a secure frame for theological statements. This notion could be of value for the *Acrostic Hymn of Nebuchadnezzar II* as well. Linking this text firmly to Nabû through the acrostic could have formed a solid frame for the relatively new attributes of Nabû that were normally associated with Marduk, though this must remain speculative.⁶ In the following, I will argue, i.e., that the frame the acrostic provides is employed creatively in the text, through combination with another literary device, in order to clarify important shifts in the text's fourth stanza.

§A) *Graphic signalling of a change in divine agency*

Before discussing the orthography of the last stanza of this hymn, I provide a collated transliteration and translation of it, as well as a commentary on individual lines in footnotes where pertinent for the following discussion. I will then proceed to discuss the usage of graphic signalling in this stanza, on which my interpretation, and therefore translation, of the text rests. The orthographic features in question are highlighted in

³ E.g., Jastrow (1905: 510), also Zimmern (1905: 8), though marking his suggestion with a question mark, and, following them, Castellino (1946: 173). Nabû's name does not occur in the text of the individual stanzas, but this is probably due to the damaged state of the tablet, with the beginning of the text that likely contained it broken off (see the transliteration in §B).

⁴ See, e.g., Soll (1988: 307), von Soden/Falkenstein (1953: 42).

⁵ The effect is not entirely restricted to the visual level. The sign BU at the beginning of the third stanza is used only with the values bu- and pu- in the acrostic, and not as, e.g., gid₂. This usage is similarly found in the *Babylonian Theodicy*, see Lambert (1996 [1963, 1960]: 66). A difference lies in the use of logograms in the acrostic, as these are not attested in the *Babylonian Theodicy* (Oshima 2014: 117), but do occur in the acrostic of the *Acrostic Hymn of Nebuchadnezzar II*.

⁶ The hymns published by Lambert (1978) do not present an acrostic embedding for their new attributes of Nabû.

bold. The transliteration, including readings in the breaks, follows Oshima (2014: 475f.), except for minor deviations such as the suggested beginning of l. 39. Oshima's autograph copy of the text is available at https://cdli.ucla.edu/dl/lineart/P499560_1.jpg (accessed 31.08.2020). The translation is my own.

- 31 u_2 -ša-ti-ir be-lu-ut-su e-li ku-ul-la-tu₄ ba-'-u₂-la-a-t[u₄*]
 32 u_2 -ša-ak-ni-iš še-pu-uš-šu UN^{mes} u₃ ma-a-ti-ta-a[n*]
 33 u_2 -ma-al-la qa-tu-uš-šu ša-al-ma-tu₄ qaq-qa-du a-na re-e₂-u₂-t[u]
 34 u_2 ^dAMAR.UTU EN GAL-u₂ ra-'-i-mu ša-ar-ru-u₂-t[u]
 35 u_2 -bu-lam-ma lib₃-ba-šu za-na-a-nu ¹e₂¹-sag-ila₂ e₂-zi-da u₃ u₂-te-ed-du-šu ba-bi-i-lu^{ki} URU na-ra-m[i*-šu]
 36 u_2 -ša-ab-ši a-na ma-li-ku-u₂-tu ^d+AG-NIG₂.DU-URU₃ mu-ṭi-ib lib₃-bi-šu ru-bu-u₂ pa-li-iḥ-šu bi-nu-tu qa-t[i-šu]
 37 [u₂⁷ te-n]e₂¹še¹-e-tu-šu ki-na-a-ta ip-pa-li-is-ma a-na LUGAL-u₂¹ (T: LU)-tu kiš-šat UN^{mes} e-pe-e-šu it-ta-bi zi-ki-[ir-šu]
 38 [u₂-ša-at-m]i-iḥ ri-it-tu-uš-šu ^{gi5}NIG₂.GIDRU i-ša-ar-tu₄ mu-rap-pi-ša₂-at ma-a-t[u*]
 39 [u₂-ša₂[?]-ziz²] i-na i-di-šu ^{gi5}TUKUL^{mes} da-an-nu-tu ka-mu-u₂ na-ki-ri-šu
 40 [u₂-ša-at]-li-im-šu ^{gi5}TUKUL.DINGIR la pa^o-du-u₂ ka-ši-du a-a-bi u₃ za-ma-a-nu

- 31 He (Nabû) increased his lordship over the entire population.
 32 He made the people and all countries lie at his feet.
 33 He places the black-headed people in his hand for shepherdship.
 34 So Marduk, the great lord, the one who loves kingship,
 35 desired the provisioning of Esangila (and) Ezida and the renewal of Babylon, his beloved city.
 36 He brought Nabû-kudurri-ušur into existence for governing, the one who pleases his (Marduk's) heart, the prince, the one who is reverent towards him (Marduk), the creation of [his (Marduk's)] ha[nd],
 37 and he looked favourably at his loyal people and he called his (Nabû-kudurri-ušur's) name to exercise kingship over all humankind.
 38 He (Nabû) let his (Nabû-kudurri-ušur's) hand take the just sceptre, the one (sceptre) which extends the land.
 39 He [placed] at his side the strong weapons which overcome his enemies.
 40 He bestowed on him the unsparing mace which defeats adversaries and foes.

As mentioned above, this last stanza is of interest for its ambivalent distribution of actors. It cites Marduk alone in connection with establishing Nabû-kudurri-ušur II's rule, while any transition to Nabû as the acting deity is not made explicitly. According to the translations of this stanza given by Seux (1976: 128) and Foster (2005: 851), for example, the action does not revert to Nabû.⁸ Oshima (2014: 474), on the other hand, argues that Nabû must be the acting deity in the final section of the stanza (ll. 38–40). My translation takes up this reading of the text. Oshima bases his argument on the content of line 38, where the king is handed his sceptre by a deity. According to Oshima, this deity must be Nabû, who, according to a reconstruction of the Babylonian coronation ritual as well as parallel text passages, is responsible for handing the sceptre to the king (George 1996: 383f.). In his commentary to this line, Oshima (2014: 480) states that the text itself provides “no internal evidence” for the switch back to Nabû.

⁷ There may still be remnants around the break at the beginning of the line, which seem to be similar to the upper left section of u₂ in the line above, but this is not entirely certain from the photo.

⁸ Foster's (2009: 191) suggestion that the hymn was built from pre-existing material derives from von Soden (1972–1975: 548). Unfortunately, von Soden does not specify what this assumption is based on and to which lines it refers. Foster equally does not clearly indicate which lines he refers to, but seems to indicate parts of stanza four, probably lines 34 until the end of the text, based on his translation. If so, this is unlikely, as the last lines of the stanza are clearly associated with the first lines of the stanza (see below). If not, Foster must be referring to the marked section in the middle of the stanza, which would show that he recognised the particularity of this section as well.

In fact, two, possibly three, arguments support Oshima’s understanding of this stanza. The first argument builds on the linguistic level, while the second builds on the orthographic level of the text.⁹ Additionally, the structure of the text may serve as another indicator. We will start with the linguistic level, in this case, the choice of words. The verbal form employed to express Nabû’s handing over of the sceptre, *[uṣatm]iḥ* (line 38), is a Š-stem of the verb *tamaḥu*. This specific stem of the verbal form is only attested for Nabû handing over a just sceptre (*ḥaṭṭu išartu*) to the king in Neo-Babylonian royal inscriptions. It occurs several times in the royal inscriptions of Nabû-kudurri-uṣur II.¹⁰ Other deities, including Marduk, are associated with different forms of this verb, with other verbs altogether when handing over a sceptre to the king, or with handing over a different item, or they do not employ the adjective *išartu*.¹¹ It is likely that this association evoked a link to Nabû for some of the audiences of this text.¹²

On the orthographic level, the passage about Marduk is framed by lines 34 and 37, which start with the sign u_2 (ŠAM), in line with the acrostic. Usually in this stanza, u_2 at the beginning of the line is used to introduce verbal forms. This is maintained throughout most of the stanza. Only in these two lines does u_2 serve as a connective *u*, a function usually expressed with u_3 or u .¹³ Deviations from this distribution of *u*-signs in various texts are often taken to be peculiar or even erroneous spellings: see, for instance, Da Riva’s (2008: 85) remarks on the “unusual (from the Neo-Babylonian point of view) usage of some sign values,” under which she lists the usage of u_3 instead of u_2 in some Neo-Babylonian royal inscriptions (Da Riva 2008: 86). Perhaps more commonly, such unusual spellings can be subsumed under writing mistakes, see, e.g., George (2013: 137) on divinatory tablets dating to the first Sealand dynasty, who also gives further examples.¹⁴

In line with these observations, the acrostic hymn to Nabû normally uses u_3 (not u or u_2) to link elements (cf., e.g., ll. 3, 4, [9], 12, 17, 18, 25, 27, 35).¹⁵ The usage of u_2 in this section of the text therefore stands out. Jastrow (1905: 512 note 4), one of the early commentators of this text, interpreted the usage of u_2 in this context as superfluous, the sign having been used only to preserve the acrostic. Such a negative evaluation underestimates the author(s)’ creativity and the care invested in the writing of this hymn. The two unusual instances of u_2 where u_3 would be expected mark a change in divine agency, from Nabû to Marduk and back to Nabû, with u_2 in l. 34 opening the passage focusing on Marduk, and u_2 in l. 37 signalling the conclusion of this passage with this line.¹⁶ The construction thereby also indicates the textual structure. The demarcation

⁹ The following considerations are based on the assumption that the restoration of line 37 by Oshima (2014: 476) is correct. Note that the initial sign and the verb, though not in the same form, were also suggested by the text’s first editor, Strong (1898: 159).

¹⁰ A search of the Neo-Babylonian royal inscriptions currently housed at ORACC (<http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/ribo/babylon7/corpus/>, accessed 01.07.2021) lists six, possibly seven instances where *tamaḥu* in the Š-stem is associated with Nabû handing over a just sceptre to the king, in inscriptions from the reigns of Nabû-kudurri-uṣur II (Nebuchadnezzar 002: i 46; 023: i 17; [036: i 3’, restored]; C212: i 13), Nergal-šar-uṣur (Neriglissar 2: i 11 and 3: i 11) and Nabû-nā’id (Nabonidus 3 vii 29’). Two texts from the reign of Nabû-nā’id combine the verb in this context with Šamaš, but they mention *ḥaṭṭu* without *išartu*, and they use the 2nd m. sg., not the 3rd m. sg. as in the examples with Nabû (Nabonidus 28 iii 21 and 29 iii 18). None combines it with Marduk. The subject for the last pertinent instance in our corpus, Nabonidus 44: obv. 18, is unclear because the tablet is partly broken. In addition to ORACC, the most recent edition of the texts of Nergal-šar-uṣur and Nabû-nā’id can be found in Weiershäuser/Novotny (2020).

¹¹ Possible verbs are, e.g., *nadānu* etc., see the list with references in Seux (1967: 103) and the entries on the individual verbs. *nadānu* can also be used for Nabû handing over a just sceptre, see, e.g., Nebuchadnezzar II 002: iv 19. *šutmuḥu* can be combined with other staffs or sceptres. For instance, in Neriglissar 1 i 33f. (Weiershäuser/Novotny 2020: 37), Marduk hands over a staff, *uṣparu*, to the king using this verb.

¹² I use the term audiences advisedly – we cannot be sure in which contexts this hymn was read or possibly recited. In a recent publication, Worthington (2020: 139–150) has discussed literary devices extensively, specifically instances of word play, and the identification of such literary devices, which relates to questions of authorial intent vs. the reception by the audiences. He shows that authorial intent is difficult to ascertain, and that a focus on the audiences of a text and what various audiences could have understood is a more fruitful avenue.

¹³ For the development of these writing conventions, see Aro (1955: 25), and specifically for Middle and Neo-Babylonian royal inscriptions, see Stein (2000: 16).

¹⁴ I thank Enrique Jiménez for this reference.

¹⁵ There are no other attestations of connective *u* in the hymn, apart from the two instances discussed here, but the usage of u_3 to link pairs or several elements shows that u_3 is indeed used as expected in this text, and that u_2 does not replace u_3 more generally.

¹⁶ Deviation from the expected can draw attention and be used for foregrounding, a well-known concept in linguistics in the field of style. The deviation “can take place at any level of the language (phonetic, graphical, morphological, syntactic, or lexical)” (Her-

expressed by u_2 in l. 37 is fully in line with the reversion to Nabû as acting deity suggested by Oshima (2014: 474, 480) based on ritual information and on a parallel text in which Nabû hands a sceptre to a king. A similar deviation from an acrostic, though in this case for an explicit change in focus, from the general to the specific, can be found in the *Babylonian Theodicy*, l. 275, where after ten lines which employ u_2 at the beginning of verbal forms and nouns, the last line uses it for the conjunction u : u_2 *ia-a-ši et-nu-šu be-le pa-ni re-dan-n[i]*, “And as for me, the penurious, a nouveau riche is persecuting me” (translation quoted from Lambert 1996 [1963, 1960]: 87).¹⁷

The notion of ll. 34–37 framing a section with Marduk as the acting party is also supported by the larger structure of the fourth stanza, as well as the prominent literary device, the acrostic. With regard to the latter, the pattern of the acrostic in this stanza leads one to expect a verbal form starting with u_2 -, as can be found in all lines except ll. 34 and 37. This alone suggests that the use of u_2 to write connective u is an intentional variant meant to mark an important passage in the text. Another structural element may provide additional support for this suggestion. The sections preceding and following the insertion about Marduk (ll. 31–33, 38–40) are each of three lines’ length and they share the same topic. The first three lines, ll. 31–33, describe Nabû’s actions for the king with regard to other humans, as do the last three lines, ll. 38–40, though here, other humans mainly represent enemies. The lines are, for the most part, built on a repetitive pattern, with an initial verbal form followed by a word or expression with the suffix *-šu* in different functions. The only exception to this is the closing line of the hymn, in which the suffix is attached directly to the verbal form. This deviation from the pattern seems to represent an indication of the end of the text. This regular frame highlights the specificity of the insertion marked with u_2 .¹⁸

In sum, the lines discussed here show a marked usage of connective u as a structural device guiding the interpretation of a controversial passage in the text. In the following, I will present another example of marked orthography in the acrostic hymn to Nabû, in this case enhancing the message of the first stanza of the text.

§B) Graphic signalling to enhance the content of the text

I will focus here on the graphic dimension of the first stanza (ll. 1–10). Below, I first provide a transliteration and a translation of the stanza, highlighting the relevant features in bold, before proceeding to discuss graphic signalling in this section, as this phenomenon informs my interpretation of the text. Again, the transliteration, except for minor changes, follows Oshima (2014). The translation is my own. The commentary given in the footnotes is restricted to elements with a bearing on the following discussion.

- 1 ^{d1}[*na-bu-u₂* EN GAL]-¹*u₂*¹ *ma-li-ku* DINGIR.DINGIR *šu-ut* AN
2 DINGI[R *a²-lik² pa²-an²¹⁹* DINGIR.DINGIR GAL]^{meš1} AD ^{meš d}+*en-lil₂* DINGIR.DINGIR EN *gi-im-[ri]*

nández-Campoy 2016: 19). For a short introduction to this concept and further references, see, e.g., Hernández-Campoy (2016: 18–24) and Jeffries/McIntyre (2010: 31–33).

17 I thank Enrique Jiménez for this reference. The usage of u_2 in l. 275 of the *Babylonian Theodicy* emphasises a change in focus, reverting to the individual fate of the sufferer. Only later in the line, a new subject is introduced. It is not an implicit change as in the *Acrostic Hymn of Nebuchadnezzar II*. Usage of the conjunction u similar to the one in the *Babylonian Theodicy* can, for instance, be found in Nabonidus 47: i 22f., though with u , and without a change in subject: (22) (...) *u ana-ku / ul-tu URU-ia TIN.TIR^{ki} u₂-še-ri-qa-an-ni-ma* (...), “Moreover, – he (Sîn) took me far away from my city Babylon and (...)”, transliteration and translation following Weiershäuser/Novotny (2020: 189).

18 With regard to this prevalent repetitive structure in the stanza, it is worth noting that the beginning of l. 35, a line within the marked passage of ll. 34–37, also adheres to it. It is possible that this alignment served to anchor the marked passage firmly in the remaining stanza, providing compositional coherence and holding the text together. It would then be an additional element demonstrating the creativity and skill informing the creation of this text.

19 There are various possibilities for the broken section of this line, several of which are presented by Oshima (2014: 478), among them “*a-lik pa-an*” as given here. The size of these signs makes them a good fit for the broken space at the beginning of the line, unlike most of the other suggested reconstructions. This reading also provides an additional instance of the sign DINGIR, but it remains tentative. While it seems an appropriate addition, it does not influence the following discussion in a decisive way.

- 3²⁰ **DINGIR** š[a-q]u-u₂ ra-²im ki-it-tu₄ u₃ mi-ša-ru mu-še-zi-ib KI^[ti₃]
 4 ^d[LUGAL¹.DIM₃.ME.ER.AN.KI-A LUGAL **DINGIR.DINGIR** ša₂ kiš-šat AN^e u₃ KI^{ti₃} mu-ši-im ši-ma-a-ta **DINGIR.DI[NGIR GAL^{meš}]**
 5 **DINGIR** ^re¹-[liš] ^ri-na¹ AN^{[e} šu-u]r₂-ba-a-ta i-lu-ut-su šap-liš i-na ap-si-i šu-tu-ra-at [x x (x)]
 6a **DINGIR** n[u-uḫ-ši ša₂ i-na igli-gal₂-la-u₂-ti-šu ši-ir-ti₃ u₂-šab-šu-u₂ ina aš-na-**an** **DINGIR DINGIR.DINGIR** ša **DIN[GIR.DINGIR GAL^{meš}]²¹**
 6b *nin-da-be₂-e* ^ru₂¹-[kan-nu]
 7 [^di-gi₄-gi₄²² u₃] ^rd¹a-nun-na-ki i-la-ab-bi-nu-uš ap-pi u₂-ša-ar-bu-^ru₂¹ [LUGAL-ut-su]
 8 **D[INGIR.DINGIR GAL^{meš}]²³ u₂-taq]-qu-u₂ a-ma-at-su i-na-aš-ša-ru ^rqi₂¹-[bit-su]
 9 [**DINGIR** x x x (x)] ^rx¹ ^rgu₂¹-gal-lu₄ AN^e [u₃ KI^{ti₃} mu-ša-aš-ki-in ḫe₂-gal₂-la ša₂ ka-[li (x x)]²⁴
 10 [**DINGIR.DINGIR** šu-ut]²⁵ ^rAN¹ KI u₂-ša-t[i-ru b]e-lu-ut-su i-na-a-du n[ar²-bi²-šu²]²⁶**

- 1 The god [*Nabû*, great lor]d, advisor of the gods of heaven,
 2 the god, [*leader of the great god*]s, the fathers, Enlil of the gods, lord of everything,
 3 the exalted god who loves justice and righteousness, who saves the ea[rth],
 4 Lugaldimmerankia, the king of the gods of the entirety of heaven and earth, who determines the destinies of the [great] gods,
 5 the god, above, in heaven, his divinity is greatest, below, in the Apsû, his [...] is surpassing,
 6 the god [of abundance, who creates grain in] his supreme wisdom, the god of the gods, who [provides] the [great] god[s] with cereal offerings,
 7 [the Igigi and] the Anunnaki stroke the(ir) noses to him, they exalt [his kingship],
 8 [the great gods] pay attention to his words, they obey [his com]mand,
 9 [the god ...] the canal inspector of heaven [and eart]h, who provides abundance of everything,
 10 [the gods of heav]en and earth made his lordship pre-eminent, they praise [*his greatness*].

The first stanza is marked by the usage of the sign **DINGIR** at the beginning of each line, forming the acrostic. Its usage, however, goes beyond the acrostic. The sign itself can be used in various ways in cuneiform writing, and this polyvalence is exploited extensively in the first stanza of our text. The sign is used as a determinative for divine entities, as a logogram for deities and heaven (in the readings **DINGIR** and **AN**, respectively), as well as for its syllabic value *-an*. This leads to the striking occurrence of probably 36 instances of the sign

²⁰ T. Oshima kindly suggested this reading for the break at the beginning of the line (personal communication). Enrique Jiménez suggested a reading *ki-[i-ni]* or similar at the end of the line, which is also possible.

²¹ In line with other attestations of this spelling in this stanza, **DINGIR.DINGIR** is to be preferred to **DINGIR^{meš}** as suggested by Oshima (2014: 475). Judging from the spacing of the signs on the tablet, the tentative addition of **GAL^{meš}** (Oshima 2014: 475) seems likely and is therefore included fully.

²² Editions earlier than Oshima's (2014: 475–477) suggested adding the Igigi in l. 8 (Seux 1976: 126 with note 14, likely the basis for Foster ³2005: 732) in light of their frequent pairing with the Anunnaki. Judging from the size of the broken space at the beginning of l. 8, this remains a possibility, but the broken space at the beginning of l. 7 is probably an even better candidate, as suggested by Oshima. The size and spacing of the signs forming the word Igigi in l. 12 suggests that this addition would fit the size of the broken space on l. 7 very well.

²³ The addition **GAL^{meš}** in the break at the beginning of the line, contra Oshima's suggestion (2014: 475) of simple **DINGIR.DINGIR**, is based on the observation that, from the viewpoint of previous lines and column spacing, the space available on the tablet could easily accommodate more than just two signs. Judging from the photograph used for collation, it is difficult to establish how many signs are missing in the damaged part at the beginning of the line and where the empty space, clearly visible under the sequence *a-nun-* of the previous line, started. There could be more signs lost in the break. A Nabû-hymn edited by Mayer (1993) contains phrasing reminiscent of the one here (obv. 6'), but not sufficiently similar to warrant a parallel restoration.

²⁴ I refrain from adding a suffix in the break at the end of the line though it is possible, see note 36.

²⁵ For the restoration at the beginning of the line, see the parallel in l. 28, **DINGIR.DINGIR** šu-ut AN KI, the close parallel in l. 1, **DINGIR.DINGIR** šu-ut AN, and note 21.

²⁶ This restoration is uncertain. Previous treatments (CAD B: 203, s.v. *bēlūtu*, followed by Seux 1976: 126 with note 17) suggested a reading *il[ūssu]*, translated as “la di[vinité]”, likely based on the copy by Strong (1898: 155), but the remaining traces at the beginning of the break do not seem to allow a reading **DINGIR**. Oshima (2014: 475, 479) suggested *narbû*, ‘greatness,’ but noted that other terms are possible as well.

DINGIR in the first ten lines of the text, an average of 3.6 per line.²⁷ This accumulation does not continue in the other three stanzas (which feature eleven, eleven and four occurrences, respectively), and it is significantly higher than in other similar length sections of texts praising Nabû. For instance, the syncretistic hymn to Nabû (LKA 16) contains 24 occurrences in 18 lines, an average of 1.33 per line. Because of the less frequent usage in the other stanzas of our acrostic hymn, the average for the entire text (40 lines) is 1.55 instances per line.

The acrostic in part accounts for this phenomenon. The usage of the sign DINGIR for the acrostic element at the beginning of the lines seems to have been restricted to the divine determinative for names and the logogram for “god(s)”,²⁸ while the usage in the rest of the stanza goes beyond this. The intensive usage of DINGIR is most obvious in line 6, where we likely find DINGIR six times in a row, four times in direct sequence, and with at least one, but probably two more instances after an inserted *ša* (-an DINGIR DINGIR.DINGIR *ša* DIN[GIR.DINGIR]).²⁹ Another possible way to express the plural of “gods” (*ilû/ilānu*) would be DINGIR^{meš}. This type of writing occurs only once in the hymn, in the third stanza (l. 22), while all other preserved instances of the plural of DINGIR are spelled DINGIR.DINGIR. Most other expressions of the plural in the text, like AD^{meš} (“fathers,” l. 2), use a different system for plural terms. Both these factors further underline the probability that the sign is used with a deliberately high frequency.

The orthographic representation of the plural in Akkadian is not fixed. The spelling DINGIR.DINGIR is the most common way to express the plural of “god” in some texts.³⁰ Indeed, the choice of orthographic means can be influenced by various factors, among them text genre, but such distinctions are rather complex. For instance, while DINGIR.DINGIR seems prevalent in *Enûma eliš*, individual manuscripts of the text prefer DINGIR^{meš} (see, e.g., Talon 2005: 33 for variants to *Ee. I 7*), and the spelling of the plural can also be mixed within a single manuscript (see, e.g., Talon 2005: 34 on *Ee. I 21*).³¹ Wisdom compositions show similar variation between manuscripts, such as l. 55 of *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, or within one manuscript of a text, such as the *Babylonian Fürstenspiegel* (DINGIR^{meš} GAL^{meš} in l. 7, but DINGIR.DINGIR GAL.GAL in ll. 29, 57 and 58 in the manuscript DT 1)³² or, possibly closer to our acrostic hymn, the Great Prayer to Nabû (DINGIR¹.DINGIR in ll. 14' and 16').³³ Babylonian royal inscriptions likewise show a preponderance of DINGIR^{meš} over DINGIR.DINGIR in inscriptions from the Middle Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian periods,³⁴ while DINGIR.DINGIR accounts for almost all instances of the plural in the inscriptions of Nabû-kudurrī-ušur II. Although this may have a bearing on the choices made in our text, even the royal inscriptions of Nabû-kudurrī-ušur II show variation. For instance, they often employ DINGIR.DINGIR GAL.GAL to express the plural *ilû rabûtu*, but they can also simply write DINGIR GAL.GAL.³⁵ It is exactly this orthographic freedom which makes it possible for orthography to be exploited as a meaning-making device in various combinations and settings.

²⁷ The tablet is partly broken. 25 DINGIR-signs are still visible on the tablet. If we include the suggested restorations – which are, for the most part, highly probable because of parallel epithets and the way *ilānu* is usually spelled on the tablet – we arrive at 36 instances. The line-by-line count is (with numbers in brackets giving the number of instances including restorations of broken sections of the text): 4 (l. 1) – 3 [6] – 1 – 7 – 2 (l. 5) – 6 [7] – [2] – [2] – 1 [2] – 1 [3] (l. 10).

²⁸ The beginnings of the lines are partly reconstructed.

²⁹ Such graphic repetitions may also play into the sequence of three EN-signs in l. 11 or, possibly, the vertical alignment of the sign sequence of identical and similar signs at the beginning of the third column in ll. 8–11, I-ĤE₂-I-I, a visual arrangement that would transcend stanza boundaries.

³⁰ I thank Enrique Jiménez for encouraging a discussion of this topic, and for directing me specifically to *Enûma eliš* and Neo-Babylonian royal inscriptions for comparative case studies.

³¹ For a more recent treatment of this text see Lambert (2013), especially p. 45–60 for tablet I, but Talon’s presentation of the different manuscripts makes the orthographic variants clearer than Lambert’s treatment.

³² For variants in the manuscripts in these two texts, see conveniently Lambert (1996 [1963, 1960]: 32f., 112 and 114).

³³ For this text, see the recent edition by A. Lenzi on <http://akkpm.org/P394371.html> (accessed 09.06.2021), who transliterates [...] 'AN¹.AN in both cases. Lenzi remarks that a new edition with commentary of this text can be found in the PhD thesis of G. Rozzi, but a copy of this edition was not available at the time of writing.

³⁴ This statement is based on an automatic search of Frame (1995).

³⁵ This is based on a search of the royal inscriptions of Nabû-kudurrī-ušur II on ORACC, within the project “Royal Inscriptions of Babylonia online, sub-project Babylon 7 (<http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/ribo/babylon7/corpus/>, accessed 08.06.2021). A good example of a variegated usage of spellings is the text Nebuchadnezzar II C38 (also listed as such in Da Riva 2008), which employs

While one could attribute this accumulation of the sign DINGIR in the hymn simply to a graphic play relating to the acrostic, the other stanzas do not show a similar patterning. Their acrostic elements do not repeat themselves at such a conspicuously high frequency. Therefore, another nuance to this phenomenon seems likely. The hymn itself progresses gradually from an entirely supernatural and transcendent approach to Nabû in the first stanza,³⁶ to mentioning the king, the first human element, in the second stanza. It then centres on the role of Nabû for humankind and the king in the third stanza. The progression culminates in the fourth and last stanza, which focuses on the appointment of king Nabû-kudurri-ušur II.³⁷ This progression from a heavenly to a human level befits the distribution of the usage of DINGIR in the text, which starts with the high number of 36 instances in the section that focuses exclusively on Nabû's roles and positions in the non-human realm, and recedes to a dwindling four attestations in the last stanza, which focuses on the king. In this stanza, the spelling of the royal name contains "Nabû" as well, and could therefore have contained another instance of the sign DINGIR. This, however, is not the case, as here, and only here in this text as far as it is preserved, Nabû is spelled with a ligature, ^d+ag, not syllabically, as in the acrostic and likely in the first line, or as ^dpa, another possible spelling of Nabû.³⁸ Thus, the transcendent focus of our first stanza is correlated consistently with an intentional proliferation of the sign DINGIR in this text: orthography mirrors content, or rather, enhances the text's message on an orthographic level.

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both DINGIR.DINGIR and DINGIR^{mes} as well as DINGIR.DINGIR GAL.GAL. For DINGIR.DINGIR, and DINGIR GAL.GAL in one manuscript, see, for example, the text *Nebuchadnezzar II* O37, listed as C027 in Da Riva (2008), or the text *Nebuchadnezzar II* C37, listed as C37 in Da Riva (2008).

36 This understanding differs slightly from Oshima's (2014: 476) translation. He suggested reading *he₂-gal₂-la ša ka-[li-ši-na]* in line 9, and thereby linked *hegallu* to mankind, translating "abundance of al[l of them (mankind)]" (Oshima 2014: 476). In a private communication, T. Oshima also raised the possibility of reading *dad-me (dadmū, "the inhabited world")* in the break. I understand *hegallu* as referring instead to flora and fauna, an often-attested usage (see CAD H: 167f., s.v. *hegallu*). Other translations do not specify what *hegallu* refers to, cf. the translation of Seux (1976: 126), who translates "l'abondance" without further specification, and Foster (³2005: 849), non-specified "prosperity".

37 This is not to say that these individual sections, even the first stanza, do not already work towards the divine appointment of Nabû-kudurri-ušur II. The sections should be seen as integrated parts of a larger whole. While the first stanza focuses entirely on the divine, this is still embedded in the larger context of the hymn and the necessary divine framework for the king and his divine appointment, which is the larger goal of the text. Individual elements work towards this notion. For instance, as pointed out to me by T. Oshima, already the name *Lugal-dimmerankia*, by virtue of the ritual context in which it is used (see, e.g., Maul 1998: 174, 177f., 180f.), evokes the notion of determining the destiny of the king, thereby providing another link to the larger theme of the hymn.

38 In this respect, the standard ligature ^d+en-lil₂ in l. 2 deserves mention. Scribal habits may influence the choice of signs to some extent, but the writing of theophoric elements in names could differ, even in royal names, cf., e.g., the spelling of *Nergal-šar-ušur*'s name in the letter YOS 3, 106: 20: ^ldIGI.DU-LUGAL-URU₃. Similarly, Nabû-kudurri-ušur's name could be spelled with ^d+AG or with ^dPA (Tallqvist 1902: 137).

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